

## The impossible terrorist: women, violence, and the disavowal of female agency in terrorism discourses

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**The Impossible Terrorist:****Women, Violence, and the Disavowal of Female Agency in Terrorism Discourses<sup>1</sup>****Liz Sage****University of Sussex**

In “Terror: A Speech After 9-11,” Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak highlights the multiple ethical and political risks she must take in order to critique the West’s response to Al Qaeda’s September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States. Spivak is aware that in questioning the dominant discourses surrounding the war in Afghanistan and on global terrorism, she places herself in a precarious position. As we shall see, she is wary of adopting the mantle of agency upon which to rest a response in the face of the war on terrorism, which she describes as a “cruel caricature of what in us can respond” (Spivak, “Terror” 81).

On the one hand, to question the logic of that war is to risk being interpreted as defending the actions of those who perpetrate terrorism. On the other hand, challenging the prevailing understandings and representations of terrorist violence risks regurgitating the same practices that inform those very discourses, as one moves perilously close to providing an explanation of the terrorist’s actions in terms that stem from one’s own interpretation of those actions and not from the terrorists themselves. To explain the terrorist’s actions in one’s own words risks interpreting their intentions through the filter of one’s own cultural, political, or social assumptions. Thus, we are in danger of reading the terrorist’s actions in terms of cultural stereotypes of race, gender, religion, class, and so on. Last, but not least,

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Spivak realises that she is taking on a perilous task in arguing that it is necessary to interrogate the logic that allows for the condemnation of terrorist action, especially in the political climate created in the wake of the September 11, 2001, terror attacks against the United States. The strength of feeling about terrorism after the attacks was such that Spivak recounts witnessing a debate at an American university where students put their “hands up in that Law auditorium condoning murder, albeit carried out by the state” (Spivak, “Terror” 101). Spivak’s decision to mobilise her agency as an academic to try to formulate a means of responding to the seemingly unanswerable is thus rife with ethical and political danger.

Yet Spivak puts it to us that it is precisely because of these dangers that we, particularly in the West, must interrupt the rhetorical circuit that sustains the war on terrorism and terrorism discourses more broadly. In essence, this circuit works on the assumption that the only response to terrorism consists of a “counter–terrorism” course of action—a binary understanding of what constitutes a response that will ensure that terrorist violence is met with state-sanctioned violence. For Spivak, there is no hope of escaping the cycle of terror–counterterror without the recognition that a “response not only supposes and produces a constructed subject of response, it also constructs its object” (Spivak 82). The logic of terror–counterterror, then, serves to constitute and reify stereotypes of both the terrorized subject and the terrorist object to produce a self-sustaining loop that offers little alternative to perpetual violence.

Whilst Spivak’s observation may not be unfamiliar, what is significant is the symbiotic relationship between terror and counter–terror—by which I mean that terrorism’s demand for a response serves to shape the respondent, just as the response serves to construct the terrorist object. Taking the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks as a specific example, if Al Qaeda chose to read the myriad lives of the individuals who worked in the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and who happened to be on board planes they hijacked for the attacks as

representative of America's "military and economic power" (Osama bin Laden, quoted in Mir), then the Bush administration implicitly accepted that claim in forming their response to Al Qaeda. When George W. Bush launched the War on Terror at a news conference by declaring, "You're either with us or against us in the fight against terror" (6<sup>th</sup> November, 2001), he, too, assumed that a multitude of different lives could be taken as representing an "us," a homogenised mass united in the desire to respond to a terrorist "them." It is this symbiotic relationship—in which a violent demand of the terrorist object has the means of constructing the terrorized subject through that subject's apparent agency—that I wish to return to later. For now, it is important to understand the methodology that Spivak proposes for breaking through and into this self-supporting circuit.

Much in the same way that Spivak demonstrated the double silencing of subaltern women in socio-political discourses around *sati* during and after British colonial rule of India, Spivak argues that if what constitutes a response to terror, to war, to violence, is understood purely within the political, legal, or military terms already available to us, then there is no avenue for genuine change. She observes: "Unless we are trained into imaging the other, a necessary, impossible, and interminable task, nothing we do through politico-legal calculation will last, even with the chanciness of the future anterior: something will have been when we plan a something will be" (Spivak, "Terror" 83). Interestingly, here Spivak makes a deliberate decision to use the term "other" as opposed to its more widespread, capitalised version, "Other." For Spivak, the "Other" represents a pre-established conceptual space that is constructed by the subject in order to accommodate the other as Other. In such a space, the other is always anticipated and is, thus, always already framed in terms appropriate to the subject. The term "other," in contrast, does not claim the status of a pre-established concept and, hence, does not merit capitalisation. As such, the other remains irreducibly other, outside any existing framework of interpretation. In short, the Other refers to the

object constructed by an epistemology, while the other is a gesture towards the unknowable other that cannot be reduced to fit within the subject's terms.

To formulate one's response within an established framework is thus not to respond at all, because if the subject uses existing frameworks to interpret the other's actions, it in fact constructs and responds to an Other rather than interacting with that other. Be it at the level of individual reaction or international response, if the other's actions are inserted into pre-existing epistemological frameworks, there can be no response. Instead, there is only a futile attempt to overwrite the presence of an other's demand with one's own terms—terms provided and dictated by pre-established models for understanding the world. It is only in recognising the presence of an other that is irreducible to one's own terms, and impossible to quantify and qualify within one's own framework that the possibility of a response emerges. Spivak suggests we need to train our imaginations to allow for the possibility of the other, as a form of "preparation for the eruption of the ethical" (Spivak, "Terror" 83). It is Spivak's definition of the ethical that provides us with a model with which to appraise the subject/object relationship set up in terrorism discourses. Spivak tells us:

I understand the ethical [. . .] to be an interruption of the epistemological, which is the attempt to construct the other as object of knowledge. Epistemological constructions belong to the domain of the law, which seeks to know the other, in his or her case, as completely as possible, in order to punish or acquit rationally, reason being defined by the limits set by the law itself. The ethical interrupts this imperfectly, to listen to the other as if it were a self, neither to punish nor to acquit ("Terror" 83).

It is important to stress here that Spivak is not suggesting that we abandon legal and political forms of response, but rather than we recognise that when we rely on these pre-established modes of response, we are in fact substituting judgement for response. Response requires the suspension of the epistemological criteria through which the subject—the presumed master of the epistemology—claims access to the other so that the other can be heard. Without this suspension, the subject can never address or respond to an other, but will always instead address the Other constructed by the subject's own epistemological approach. For Spivak,

“to respond means to resonate with the other,” to let the other’s voice reverberate within ourselves and in doing so, “contemplate the possibility of complicity” (“Terror” 87). This ability to hear the other, to resonate with the other, pre-figures change (Spivak, “Terror” 87). Change is set in motion by recognising the possibility of complicity with the other and understanding the limits of one’s own epistemological constructs or figurations of the world.

The ethical task that Spivak sets for herself and for the world as a whole is thus a hazardous one in such a volatile political climate. She argues that the ethical always begins with a suspension or interruption of epistemological systems in order to allow the other to be heard in its own terms. To drive home how radical this ethical demand is, let us be plain: Spivak is asking that the countries such as Spain, the U.K., and the U.S.A. , put aside their prevailing narratives of the War on Terror to allow those who have attacked cities in each of these nations to be heard in their own terms. In Spivak’s critique of the post-September 11<sup>th</sup> climate, this means specifically putting aside Western stereotypes of what constitutes Islam—or more significantly, Islamic fundamentalism—in favour of listening to how the Islamic world represents itself and engages with extremist elements in its own space and on its own terms. Such a suspension of stereotypes and epistemological constructions of the other involves “the attempt to figure the other as imaginative actant” (Spivak, "Terror" 94) possessing a logic, rationale, or motivation that cannot simply be explained in terms that are not their own. Without such a radical move, Spivak posits that the violent cycle of terrorist attack followed by aggressive state or international action is destined to continue across the globe, be it in the form of a U.S-led battle against Al Qaeda, the intractable circuit of Palestinian attack followed by Israeli military reaction, or in specific, localised clashes between insurgents and states. Spivak’s demand is subtle thinking for unsubtle times, and she herself acknowledges that her own attempts to adopt this ethical stance in relation to suicide bombing has “provoked so much hostility” that she has to couch her comments within a pre-

emptive explanation (Spivak, "Terror" 93). Perhaps unsurprisingly then, we find Spivak's analysis peppered with clarifications about what she is not stating, alongside her positive assertions. This serves as a necessary paradigm for attempts to take up Spivak's stance and to prevent misreadings that shut down the ethical spaces opened up by such interventions.

As such, it is necessary to make it clear that this paper interrogates the epistemological framework through which the West understands women's participation in terrorist activity. In doing so, I adopt Spivak's methodology to expose the ways in which the agency of women who engage in terrorism is disavowed by the substitution of the epistemologically-constructed female terrorist for the flesh-and-blood violent woman in the West's dominant narratives of terrorism, a substitution which carries particular consequences when the object under scrutiny is classified as a "non-Western" woman. Moreover, I ask what mechanisms install this epistemological framework in the first instance and then examine the kinds of normative subjectivities both presumed and produced by the current framework prevalent in Western terrorism discourses.

My intention is not, however, to try and speak for the women represented in the studies and discourses I critique. To offer alternative explanations for their actions can, to a certain degree, open up debates about women and violence, but it nonetheless leaves the women in question as voiceless as the narratives one tries to disrupt, as such explanations potentially overwrite what the women themselves have stated about their actions. My focus is thus on the representation of women's violence. This is not meant as a critique that "privilege[s] "our" representations of terrorism in order to reveal how global politics is constructed "at the expense of the subaltern, a risk Katherine E. Brown identifies as inherent in such critiques (205). Instead, I want to unearth what is at stake for women across the world if such representations are not interrogated and located as arising from a specific socio-cultural context. In doing so, the work of Luce Irigaray becomes vital in both understanding

this context, and in articulating the connection between privileged and subaltern women in such a way as to avoid overwriting the differences between women and falling back on universal concepts of femininity and womanhood.

### **An Epistemology of Female Violence**

There is no clear consensus about what constitutes terrorism throughout the multitude of studies and histories that make up the canon of terrorism studies. Schmid and Jongman famously demonstrated this when they uncovered at least 109 working definitions about what constitutes terrorism in the late 1980s and have discovered even more since (Schmid and Jongman). Interpretations of what counts as terrorism are varied and permeated with subtle, but significant, differences. Early attempts by authors such as W.A. Tupman and Walter Laqueur tried to develop a taxonomy that differentiated terrorist activity from guerrilla warfare (Tupman; Laqueur), while later studies focus on the differences between state and insurgent violence (for example, E. S. Herman and O'Sullivan; Wilkinson). A large section of terrorism research adopts Jonathan R. White's approach, which accepts that "we do not know how to define terrorism, but we know what it is when we see it" (4). This flexibility persists at state and international levels: branches of state power operate with different definitions of terrorism, and international and regional institutions—such as the United Nations and the European Union—are unable to produce legislation that outlines once and for all a standard for what constitutes terrorism (Schmid and Jongman; Silke). Thus, while institutions like the United Nations are increasingly attempting to define terrorism as violence that specifically targets civilians or "non-combatants," a universal definition remains elusive within terrorism studies and discourses.

There is, nonetheless, an established epistemological toolkit with which experts may discern terrorist behaviour. This toolkit can be roughly divided into examinations of the



mechanisms of terrorism—the means adopted to perpetrate violence—and the processes that bring about a terroristic turn. These processes are understood as falling into a set of specific motivational categories: religious, ideological, or political motivations; some form of social, economic, or cultural disenfranchisement; or the psychological make-up of a group or individual. Thus, with vastly varying degrees of rigour and academic legitimacy, terrorism studies include psychological, sociological, anthropological, and economic approaches in its epistemic arsenal.<sup>2</sup>

Nowhere in the array of definitions used to underpin terrorism research is it ever explicitly stated that terrorism is a specifically male form of violence. Yet although it is never openly stated that terrorist violence is inherently male, the fact that there is a subset of research dedicated specifically to women's involvement with terrorism exposes the extent to which Western culture assumes violence in general is a masculine activity. This is despite the fact that histories of terrorist violence and contemporary studies of terrorist organisations demonstrate that women have consistently been inextricably involved in such violence, as they take on any role in an organisation from supporters to carrying out attacks (see for example Victor; Bloom). Given the absence of any claim that the sex of the perpetrator has a pivotal role in identifying whether an act is terrorist or not, we have to wonder about the origins of this specific subcategory of research. Why is it that women merit special attention in terrorism studies? What are the consequences of treating women's violent actions as somehow exceptional or simply different within the spectrum of terrorist violence? And how does this gender-specific epistemological approach to violence impact wider understandings of women's agency, particularly in the political sphere?

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<sup>2</sup> For a sense of the variance in the application of these frameworks across terrorism discourses, it is worth comparing something like Andrew Sinclair's *Anatomy of Terror* with any work by Andrew Silke.

To address these questions, I will sketch out the epistemological framework used for reading women's terrorist actions by closely analysing recent investigations of women suicide bombers. In doing so, I illustrate how the language used to interpret women's violence not only disavows the woman perpetrator's capacity for action, but also forestalls attempts to critique such a disavowal. I go on to argue that Luce Irigaray's work on the relationship between the body, language, and sexual (or as she calls it, "sexuate") identity, can elucidate why a culture would produce a special epistemological approach to explain suicide bombings executed by women. In doing so, I hope to shed new light on why the figure of the woman suicide bomber holds such a morbid fascination for sections of the media, and why she is a singularly troubling figure for the dominant Western voices in the global political sphere.

### **Women Suicide Bombers**

In 2005 one of the leading journals in terrorism studies, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, dedicated a special issue to exploring women's terrorist and militant actions. In her introduction to this special edition, Cindy Ness expressed the hope that the collection would help terrorism discourses in general to "move beyond the portrayal of the female militant/terrorist as either passive victim or feminist warrior" ("Introduction" 350). Ness's opening remarks neatly sum up the prevailing stereotypes of women's violence both within terrorism studies and beyond. Her optimism about the potential impact of the work presented in that issue casts a poignant light on the articles that followed in later editions, particularly as the articles published alongside her "Introduction" worked both to disrupt and confirm the very stereotypes she critiques. Contributions such as Carolyn Nordstrom's "(Gendered) War" and Brigitte Nacos' "The Portrayal of Female Terrorists in the Media" worked to undermine stereotypes of women's passivity or militant feminism, while papers by Kathleen

Blee, Anne Nivat, and Susan McKay highlighted the significant roles women and girls play in militant organisations (Nordstrom; Nacos; Blee; Nivat; McKay). However, in in “Women Fighting in *Jihad?*” David Cook repeatedly characterises women involved with militant Islamic organisations as simply being the passive victims of an exploitative patriarchal culture, working against the attempts to open up the understanding of women’s terrorism that Ness envisions (Cook). Indeed, one would hesitate over how effective an intervention a dedicated journal issue could be, given that in a publication devoted to the scrutiny of different forms of violence and conflict, women’s violence is accorded an exceptional status, ring-fenced in a special issue.

A more recent article by Karen Jacques and Paul Taylor published in the same journal in 2008 helps to gauge how far Ness’s hopes have been fulfilled since the 2005 issue (Jacques and Taylor). The title of Jacques’ and Taylor’s article, “Male and Female Suicide Bombers: Different Sexes, Different Reasons?,” stands out from much of the literature on terrorism. If studies like Cook’s “Women Fighting in Jihad?” (2005), Margaret Gonzalez-Perez’s *Women and Terrorism: Female Activity in Domestic and International Terror Groups* (2008), and Luisella de Cataldo Neuburger’s and Tiziana Valentini’s *Women and Terrorism* (1996) make it clear that women are the main focus of their investigations, in contrast it is rare that a study states that it is specifically looking at “men” and terrorism or “male” militancy. Rarer still are texts that set out to place the two sexes alongside one another for comparative purposes. The title of Jacques and Taylor’s investigation suggests that they will do just that: see if differences in motivation to engage in acts of terror can legitimately be mapped onto different sexual identities. Yet despite their intentions, Jacques and Taylor ultimately only provide an account of “the motivations and recruitment of female terrorists” (Jacques and Taylor 304). It is this contrast between the intention expressed in the article’s title and what the study actually does that makes Jacques’ and Taylor’s piece so illuminating. It lays bare how the *a*

*priori* assumptions embedded in the epistemology of terrorism both determine the authors' interpretations and conclusions, and also shape their study in ways that run counter to their stated research aspirations. From the outset of their article, then, Jacques and Taylor suggest that women's involvement in terrorism is the exceptional behaviour that requires explanation, a presumption that simultaneously assumes men's involvement with violence is a given, as explored later.

Before looking at Jacques' and Taylor's study in detail, it is important to note that they are not alone in according male terrorism a normative status that subsequently suggests that female violence is "unique," exceptional, or problematic. In her critical analysis of work on Muslim women's suicide terrorism, Brown notes that "men's participation in political violence is assumed and taken for granted whereas women's needs proof and explanation" (Brown 203). In their discussion of the impact that Al Qaeda's attacks on the U.S. on September 11, 2001, have had on international legal and political frameworks, H. Charlesworth and C. Chinkin argue that "sex remains unexceptional and unmarked if it is the male sex" (602) that has perpetrated the violence, as male violence is understood as the norm. They posit that we would only have considered the sex of the attackers relevant if they had been women. Locating their discussions of women and terrorism in wider trends within legislative and sociological spheres, academic experts such as Ian Ward and Luisella de Cataldo Neuburger demonstrate that legal systems all over the world interpret women's violence or criminal behaviour "as a deviation from dominant male norms; female criminality is therefore defined by sociologists as a subculture" (De Cataldo Neuburger and Valentini 40; see also Ward 23, 95-122). Thus, in societies that take the masculine subject to be the norm—as is the case in patriarchal cultures across the globe—women's violence is always posited as deviant in relation to the standard, and therefore "normal," forms of violence executed by men. In effect, any and all women who resort to criminality or violence are

interpreted as exhibiting even greater deviancy than criminal or violent men, meaning that society searches for alternative explanations to account for the apparently excessive nature of women's violence.

Jacques' and Taylor's study demonstrates specifically how alternative explanations for women's deviant behaviour are constructed—in this case with terrorist violence providing an extreme example of women's turn to violence. At the beginning of their study, Jacques and Taylor cite the 2005 edition of *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, dedicated to women and terrorism, as a way of framing the goals of their research. According to them:

What this special [2005] issue did not consider in detail, and where there is arguably less understanding of female involvement, is the personal level. How are females persuaded or recruited into extremism? What motivates them into carrying out an act of suicide terrorism? (305).

This citation makes explicit that from the outset of their research, Jacques and Taylor are grounding their interpretation of women's violence in culturally-established assumptions about women. For example, women are always "persuaded or recruited," which presumes that women never seek out terror organisations of their own accord, which in turn excludes the possibility that women may choose—even in the most limited sense—to become terrorists. Similarly, it is plain from this quote that Jacques and Taylor see a direct link between women's motivation to engage in violence and their "personal" lives—a link that is in-keeping with conventional readings of women, as I discuss subsequently. Finally, even their use of the prepositional phrase "into carrying out" connotes that women engaged in acts of terrorism must be considered as passive participants in contrast to the more active participation assumed of male terrorists, who simply "carry out" attacks. Taken together, these elements of the statement of intent that begins Jacques and Taylor's research suggest they automatically assume that women terrorists will conform to cultural stereotypes of femininity in that they will be passive participants, entirely influenced by their emotions or

by the men around them. Embedded in the questions that ground their research, then, are expectations based on common patriarchal stereotypes of feminine passivity, vulnerability, and emotional impetus.

Jacques and Taylor also reinforce the cultural assumption that men always provide society with the “normal” model of subjectivity by following the established convention in terrorism studies of taking the male terrorist as the yardstick against which women’s violence should be compared. Jacques and Taylor make this assumption explicit as they outline the methodology for their study:

[. . .] by comparing the female cases to data on the motivations of male suicide terrorists, it is possible to begin to build up a picture of the unique personal motivations of female suicide terrorists (306).

In laying out the individual hypotheses that shape their study, Jacques and Taylor frame each by speculating about how female violence will compare to male violence. This is evidenced in statements they make such as: “Compared to males, females will less often be associated with religious/nationalistic motivations for carrying out suicide terrorism ” (306); and “Compared to males, females will be more frequently associated with Personal motivations for carrying out suicide terrorism”(308). Although elsewhere, Jacques and Taylor state that “males and females are equally capable of aggressive behaviour [. . .] they show no difference in their aggressive behaviour following a frustrating event,”(307) it is clear from the questions that ground their research and the structure of their hypotheses that the authors are working within a narrow epistemological framework that presumes violence is a masculine trait.

For Jacques and Taylor, then, comparing women’s terrorist violence to a male standard reveals what is relatively different and specific about women’s violence. Rather than treating women’s suicide terrorism as a phenomenon in its own right, this study suggests that understanding this kind of violence is simply a matter of describing how it differs from

male suicide terrorism. Moreover, for Jacques and Taylor, such a comparison reveals that women's actions are associated with "personal" motivations from the study's opening paragraph, while male motivations remain uninflected by any such qualification and are instead seen as political action. This is particularly important, as terrorism is widely differentiated from other forms of violent behaviour precisely because it is seen as having political, rather than personal, motivations. When women engage in terrorism, they are potentially becoming political agents and therefore are transgressing traditional feminine norms established by patriarchy that claim "women are apolitical [and] that women's primary purpose and function is to be a mother and a wife rather than having an individual identity of her own" (S. N. Herman 261–2). Thus, for a woman to become a terrorist, something truly extraordinary must have occurred, and for Jacques and Taylor, this occurrence is best understood as a "personal" experience.

Jacques' and Taylor's observations thus re-inscribe pre-established patriarchal norms about women in their own hypotheses. Although Jacques and Taylor do not generate this framework with its *a priori* assumptions about gender and violence, their work is interesting precisely because it imports the explanations offered up by existing material on (male) suicide bombing to create an interpretative lens for female terrorism. In doing so, they inadvertently unveil the gender bias in the seemingly neutral terminology that permeates terrorism studies. Descriptions such as "terrorist," "individual," "extremist group," and "identity" are not, in fact, as gender-neutral as they first appear. By bringing prior studies of apparently sexless individual's motivations into contact with questions of sex and gender, Jacques and Taylor accidentally expose how frequently their predecessors have presumed these terms must refer either to men or masculinity. In positing that the weight of motivating factors "may not be equal for men and women" (306), Jacques and Taylor reveal the lack of

attention paid to sexual identity in previous work, and thus apparently render existing explanations for suicide violence problematic or incomplete.

Once women terrorists are taken into account, it is no longer viable to make generic statements about the reasons behind terrorist violence. One can no longer simply state that a “possible motivation for suicide terrorism arises out of an individual’s psychological response to events and circumstances that were beyond their control” (Jacques and Taylor 306). This is because such a hypothesis does not take into account that an “equally important cited reason for female engagement is exploitation, whereby an organization or individual takes advantage of an individual’s specific circumstances to recruit a suicide bomber” (Jacques and Taylor 306). Once sex and gender enter the epistemological framework of terrorism, the generic individual needs to be gendered so that exceptional nature of female terrorism can be dealt with. In other words, when women remain outside the scope of a study, there is no need to mark out the sex of the perpetrators. However, the moment women enter the narrative, sex and gender become key to understanding their aberrantly violent behaviour.

The intention here is not to argue that it is invalid to examine whether or not men and women turn to violence for different reasons. Given that men and women occupy different positions in socio-cultural matrices, this seems a plausible hypothesis. Rather, I argue it is critical to understand precisely the lack of recognition of such a difference. By allowing the male terrorist to remain an ideal gender-neutral yardstick against which to gauge female terrorism, Jacques and Taylor repeat the trend that V.G. Julie Rajan has found across all representations of female suicide bombers: “women bombers, by and large, are represented in ways that highlight them first and foremost as women, in line with common social ideologies about women” (Rajan 2). Be it in the media, terrorist propaganda, or in political and academic discourses about terrorism, to talk about women suicide bombers is to talk about



female behaviour in accordance with patriarchal ideologies of femininity. The apparent necessity for taking sex into account to explain female actions goes beyond discussions of the suicide bomber. De Cataldo Neuburger explored this in her examination of sociological and criminological studies:

Women [. . .] are determined by their biology. Their hormones, their reproductive role, necessarily determine their emotionality, childishness, deviousness, etc. These traits, in turn, characterise female crime. If crime can be explained in biological terms, any adequate explanation has to explain why female, but not male, biology determines deviant behaviour. (De Cataldo Neuburger and Valentini 33)

As the terms “male” and “female” are only used in terrorism studies when the author is trying to understand women’s terrorist actions, the biological slant in interpreting women’s violent behaviour manifests itself once women enter the discussion. These terms describe the sexual characteristics of a subject or object, as opposed to the more complex, nuanced and specifically human terms, “women” and “men.” In the context of explaining human action, “male” and “female” carry with them connotations of “natural,” instinctual or animalistic behaviour. Joseba Zulaika and William A. Douglass have written a compelling analysis of how terrorists are accorded an animal-like status (149-190). It is, therefore, no surprise that the epistemology of terrorism adopts the more biological lexicon to describe sexual difference. It is telling, however, that it is only when the presence of the female body complicates the assumption of a male norm that the terms become relevant. Again, we see here a continuation of cultural stereotypes of femininity, as women have long been portrayed as occupying a space closer to the “animal”—meaning their identities are presumed to be determined by biological influences thanks to their animalistic bodies. This is a point we shall return to as we examine what is meant by “personal motivations.”

Jacques and Taylor do reject out-of-hand some of the claims their predecessors have made about female terrorism, despite working within an epistemology that identifies the female as the exceptional. For example, Matthew Dearing suggests that “[p]sychological

responses to traumatic events, such as rape or death in the family, can have a powerful impact on a woman's choice to end her life" by reluctantly being recruited for a suicide mission (1082). Jacques and Taylor challenge the evidence that such trauma is a distinctly female experience by arguing that "when men and women endure the same living conditions [ . . . ] it is reasonable to assume that they suffer the loss of a loved one to a similar extent," and that "both sexes are open to exploitation" (307). Furthermore, they concur with prior research that found that "a desire for revenge is unrelated to gender" (307). They also resist the conventional wisdom that women's involvement in terrorism is inherently connected to a demand for sexual equality by arguing that "the present data showed no instances of this occurring as a motivation and it is therefore not explored as a motivational category" (308). Thus, Jacques and Taylor are conscious of the limitations gendered stereotypes have placed on other work and make efforts to counteract such inherent bias. The selection of their data set, made up of information found on 30 female and 30 male suicide attackers—involved in groups concerned with the Palestinian–Israeli conflict; Al Qaeda and its many offshoots; Pakistan and Kurdistan separatism; and the Sri Lankan Tamil Tigers (LTTE)—reveals how they strive for a more balanced comparison and attempt to compensate for the fact that the majority of data available concerns male terrorists (Jacques and Taylor 311).

Yet the categories Jacques and Taylor use to analyse what motivates women terrorists work against their efforts to mitigate the impact of gender stereotyping by reinstalling Western ideas of femininity into the study. The authors set up four categories to describe an individual's motivation toward terrorism: "Religious/Nationalistic Reasons"; responses to "Key Events"; "Revenge" motivations; and "Personal" motivations. The distinctions among these categories are hazy at best. For example, joining a religious or nationalistic extremist group is understood as providing an individual with a means for "realizing [ . . . ] social and personal identities" and "a means of acting on anger directed toward the authorities"

(Jacques and Taylor 306). While such descriptions clearly overlap with “Personal” and “Revenge” categories, Jacques and Taylor nevertheless define membership of such a group as corresponding purely to the “Religious/Nationalistic Reasons” category. Similarly, an “individual’s psychological response to events and circumstances that were beyond their control,” such as the death of a loved one, is listed as a “Key Event” response. But “Revenge,” also brought about by the death of a loved one, “emerges from personal factors,” and yet is somehow distinct from “Key Events” and “Personal” motivation (Jacques and Taylor 306-307).

Given that anger, revenge, psychological trauma, and identity form central aspects of these categories, what then constitutes a “Personal” motivation? According to Jacques and Taylor, the personal involves low self-esteem, depression, isolation from society, shame and dishonour, and monetary problems (Jacques and Taylor 308). These are all arguably elements that are consequences of or feed into the other motivational categories, so why have they been singled out as a separate category? Jacques and Taylor argue:

Previous studies have emphasized that females tend to hold more personal motivations than males [. . .]. Even women whose motivation for participation includes an ideological element are often found to hold dualistic personal and ideological motivations, rather than pure religious or nationalistic motives. Male motivations are more likely to be found in group membership [. . .] previous involvement in the conflict [. . .] and/or religious involvement [. . .] than personal involvement. (Jacques and Taylor 308)

The personal, then, is a category designed to encompass the anomalous mixture of ideological and personal elements that make up female motivation in particular, compared to the purely ideological motivations of men. The specifically feminine quality of the “Personal” category is driven home by the fact that it is under this heading that the authors have chosen to address and dismiss feminism and gender equality as motivating factors. Rather than recognising that feminism and gender equality are in fact political movements, Jacques and Taylor categorise them as “personal” factors. These movements, it seems, are not

political interventions but personal agendas that are separate and distinct from the political or ideological sphere in which they surface. Given this overt gendering of the personal and the need to categorise it as somehow separate from the political and ideological, Jacques and Taylor's ensuing hypothesis that "[c]ompared to males, females will be more frequently associated with Personal motivations for carrying out suicide terrorism" (308) seeks to separate women's motivations for terrorism from the political context in which they act and thereby undermines any sense that these women are political or ideological actors.

Jacques' and Taylor's inclusion of the personal as an analytical category indicates their attempt to account for women's violence within an epistemological framework that takes the masculine subject as the norm. Such an elastic category allows the presumed anomaly of women's involvement in terrorist violence to be absorbed into terrorism discourses without disrupting the underlying presumptions about normative subjectivity, as it implies these actions are the result of a specifically feminine form of deviance. Central to this elasticity are particular understandings of the relationship between language and identity, as well as between language and referent. As Jacques' and Taylor's methodology is to analyse linguistic sources to assess the accuracy of their hypotheses, we can excavate these understandings from their analysis and ensuing conclusions. The study's data set was based on "biographical accounts" reported to be from would-be suicide bombers, found in "books, journals, newspaper articles and information retrieved from the Internet," and written or translated into the English language. According to Jacques and Taylor: "For each individual, the kinds of information typically available were personal accounts, accounts provided by friends, family and the media, evidence gleaned from wills and testaments, and videos left by the individual prior to their attack" (310–311). In describing their data set Jacques and Taylor are sensitive to the fact this kind of evidence will contain bias, noting, as Rosemary Skaine does elsewhere, that the connection between gender and terrorism seems to be a

singularly Western preoccupation (10). Jacques and Taylor recognise that “the Western media tends to focus more on personal aspects of female suicide terrorists with actions minimised and credibility and influence diminished” and further argue that the inclusion of the “Arab press” will serve as a counterbalance to this bias, as it is generally “freer of gender stereotypes and downplays the personal aspects of female terrorists” (311). This is a curious balancing act, for it recognises the potential for reductive stereotyping in Western representations of female violence, but does not extend this recognition to encompass the idea that “Arab” representations will come with their attendant set of stereotypes. Indeed, Rajan’s in-depth analysis of the way in which terrorist groups represent women suicide bombers exposes how such groups make women’s actions fit culturally acceptable notions of femininity by portraying them as virginal martyrs or mothers-of-the-nation (Rajan, see in particular chapters 4 and 5). As such, Rajan’s work illustrates the flawed nature of Jacques and Taylor’s assumption that Western stereotypes will be cancelled out by the inclusion of the portrayal of women in “other” cultures.

Similarly, relying on secondary sources that present culturally-biased representations of women suicide-bombers-to-be rather than what the women themselves have stated about their own violence means this data will inevitably embed the ways in which the people and culture around the bomber use gender and sexual identity to explain the women’s individual’s behaviour in the study’s results—regardless of the precautions and analytical strategies the authors’ adopt. Finally, nowhere is there an acknowledgement that stereotypes and concepts of masculinity shape the representations of male suicide bombing—an omission that installs the male subject as the norm once again in this comparative study.

Most significantly, the entire study is premised on the notion that words can be taken at face value, and that language is equivalent to its referent. Whilst Jacques and Taylor are careful to cross-check information and subject their data set to a rigorous linguistic analyses,

they do not extend their insight that Western and Arabic cultures use language differently to a wider recognition that the same can apply to individual subjects. The possibility that when different subjects explain their actions in terms of their nationalist feeling or family history, they could in some way be describing the same motivation escapes the mechanism of this study. For example, Ness's work indicates that women are more frequently involved in ethno-separatist terrorism than in religious extremist action ("In the Name"). In Jacques and Taylor's epistemic approach, we would need to decide where we draw the linguistic line between talking about one's ethnicity and one's family, which will inevitably be an arbitrary and value-laden distinction. In order to conduct their study, Jacques and Taylor would have had to strip language of any ambiguity and assume that what a given source says equates precisely to what they mean. In doing so, they also presume all subjects have an equal, universal access to language that would allow any deviation or difference in the language used to be read as indicative of an intentional production of meaning. No allowance is made for any form of difference and the impact these differences have on a subject's access to and use of language. There is no recognition that different subjects are located in a specific set of relations to existing systems of representation and thus use those systems from their particular context. To put it another way, when men talk about nationalist, religious, and ideological motivations, who is to say that they are not also talking about their families, their children, their domestic life? And if and when women use the language of personal experience to elaborate on their actions, why is this necessarily apolitical? These questions become all the more important when we consider the fact that terrorism discourses are increasingly shaping much of global politics. Given this, it becomes crucial that we ask what notions of men and women, masculine and feminine, are being covertly installed within our national and international frameworks under the guise of counter-terrorist policy based on representations of gender in terrorism discourses. In an attempt to answer this question, I

now turn to Luce Irigaray's exploration of the relationship between language, gender, and the body.

### **Body, Language, and Subjectivity**

Authors such as Rajan, Cataldo Neuburger, and Gonzalez-Perez have explored in detail the ways in which patriarchal cultures shape readings of women's violence "to support specific (often conservative) cultural ideologies about women" (Rajan 4). In each case, these studies highlight how women's testimonies about their terrorist actions are overwritten by political rhetoric, media representations, or terrorist propaganda. Whilst understanding the patriarchal logic behind these appropriations is illuminating, it does not necessarily account for why women's violence is prone to such manipulation, and why this need to co-opt women's actions is so universal. Indeed, patriarchy alone is not enough to explain why academic attempts like Jacques and Taylor's study, that strive to negate conservative ideologies about women, are unable to dislodge them entirely from their epistemological framework.

Luce Irigaray's work on the relationship between our bodies, language, and concepts of subjectivity can help build on these critiques of patriarchy. Irigaray's sustained critique of patriarchal traditions began when her linguistic research demonstrated that "[m]an and woman do not generate language and structure discourses in the same way" (*Key Writings*, 35). Through her continued analysis of the linguistic habits of men and women and boys and girls across a variety of European languages, Irigaray has repeatedly shown that:

[. . .]women seek to communicate, especially to hold dialogue, but they address above all to *him* or *them-him*, who do not take interest in subjective exchanges and who turn themselves rather towards the past than the present or the future; *men*, for their part, take interest in the concrete object if it is theirs (*my car, my watch, my pipe*, etc.) or in the abstract object if it is defined by men and belongs to a community of men to express their psychological states, their genealogical or familial problems; men avoid staying and talking as two, especially two who are different, and they would rather remain in a scarcely differentiated group of their own gender. (38, italics in original)

Women tend to speak in relational terms from their own position in the present and to address themselves to an other subject. In other words, women always direct their discourse to someone other than themselves. In contrast, rather than addressing themselves to an other, men take themselves as the speaking subject and relate themselves to objects or abstract ideas traditionally associated with masculinity. Language, for women, is thus always reaching out to a listener, while for men, it is stating something about their place in the world.

Irigaray has conducted extensive analyses of Western philosophical, psychoanalytic, and scientific discourses based on this recognition that men and women situate themselves differently within in the same linguistic system and thus use different terms and phraseology to answer supposedly similar needs. Her critiques of philosophy in particular unveil the extent to which a Western metaphysical tradition relies on the assumption that all subjects have the same access to language: “A lack of attention about generation of language, of *logos*, permitted [philosophical authors] to consider as neutral and universal a truth and even a subjectivity in fact related to syntactic and more generally linguistic specific choices” (35). Throughout her *oeuvre*, Irigaray unmask the ways in which difference is effaced in Western metaphysics and elaborates on the consequences of this assumption of a universal, neutral culture. What Irigaray’s work exposes time and again is the fact that in a Western tradition women have no access to their own symbolic or to their own culture—whether it be in the complex relations between the symbolic, imaginary, and the real in psychoanalysis, or more general terms of the culture, subjectivity, and the body. Western European cultures, languages, and metaphysics are rooted in the presumption that the neutral, universal subject is the masculine subject. As such, our symbolic systems and cultural values follow a phallic morphology that places a premium on the vertical (hierarchy, the transcendental, the abstract, the disembodied) and on singularity (the individual, the unified, the discrete category, the masterful, rational subject), among other things. It is vital to note that Irigaray does not argue



that this is man's "natural" language; rather she insists that such a culture emerges when masculinity is mistakenly equated with the phallus, at the cost of cutting man off from the rest of his bodily existence. Western patriarchy, for Irigaray, emerges as masculinity identifies itself solely with the phallus rather than understanding the masculine as coincident with the entire male body. It is only through this radically reduced ideal of a phallic masculinity that men can proclaim to be the masters of a culture, as their identities seem to "naturally" coincide with values and ideals of a phallically-constituted patriarchal society.

However, while masculinity is reduced to the purely phallic by symbolics and cultures based on this morphology, the feminine and women are left in what Irigaray describes as a state of "dereliction"—a state Whitford explains "connotes for example the state of being abandoned by God [ . . . ] left without hope, without help, without refuge. Women are abandoned outside the symbolic order; they lack mediation in the symbolic for the operations of sublimation" (77–78). In essence, dereliction describes the situation women are left in by a culture that takes the phallic subject as the ideal. In order to maintain the fantasy of a singular, unified subject, a phallic economy must disavow the fact that there are at least two sexes, at least two bodies, two morphologies that can shape a culture and a symbolic system. Thus, phallic logic constantly works to disavow the presence of sexual difference (sexual being neither a simply biological nor sociological sexual identity, but inextricably both). It does so by claiming to describe the feminine, women, in its own terms, and by reducing the feminine to the non-masculine, leading to our stereotypes of femininity as natural, earthly, passive, bodily and emotional—always the binary opposite of a masculine standard or norm. In a phallic economy, then, women and femininity are always understood in terms of otherness, through concepts, phrases and representations that do not come from women themselves. More than this, because Western culture is constituted by a phallic morphology, women and the feminine are left without terms appropriate to themselves and must instead try to express

themselves in a language and symbolic system that does not recognise their own bodily existence. Left to speak with a phallically-inflected tongue, a woman can, thus, never truly express her intention or meaning, and thus is effectively silenced, deprived of agency before she has even uttered a word.

Without a culture of her own, without a symbolic that arises from her own bodily existence, woman and the feminine remain in a state of immanence and are reduced to a solely bodily existence in a Western phallic economy. This immanence serves to sustain the phallic economy as the allocation of materiality to the feminine allows the phallic masculine to claim the transcendental for itself. Thus, women are valued for their ability to be mothers, to reproduce masculine subjects—but that is all. As the material grounding of the phallic economy that both supports and perpetuates it, it is essential that women remain as the other of the phallic masculine—for if the feminine were allowed to express itself or were accorded an agency of her own, the economy would collapse. Irigaray writes:

Subjectivity denied to woman: indisputably this provides the financial backing for every irreducible constitution as an object: of representation, of discourse, of desire. Once imagine that woman imagines and the object loses its fixed, obsessional character. As a bench mark that is ultimately more crucial than the subject, for he can sustain himself only by bouncing back off some objectiveness, some objective. If there is no more “earth” to press down/repress, to work, to represent, but also and always desire (for one’s own), no opaque matter which in theory does not know herself, then what pedestal remains for the ex-sistence of the “subject”? If the earth turned and more especially turned upon herself, the erection of the subject might thereby be disconcerted and risk losing its elevation and penetration. For what would there be to rise up from and exercise his power over? And in? (*Speculum* 133).

To imagine that women are subjects, too—different subjects rather than simply the “other” of men—is to pose a challenge to the very foundations of a phallically constituted economy.

Women’s agency and feminine subjectivity must be disavowed in all their forms—whether this means closing down the possibility of feminine symbolics or appropriating the maternal role to one of “reproducing” the subject. What, then, happens when the material

consequences of a woman's actions put her agency beyond doubt? How do Western phallic cultures absorb the impact of women's suicide bombing?

### **The Disavowal of Women's Agency and Feminine Specificity**

Placed in this context, Jacques' and Taylor's conclusions about the different motivations behind male and female suicide bombings are both predictable and illustrative of the widespread characterization of women's violence in Western discourses. After collating the first-, second-, and third-hand accounts of male and female suicide bombings and passing these texts through a log-linear analysis, the authors find that "males were found to be more often motivated by religious/nationalistic factors compared to females, whereas females cited more revenge motivations and more personal reasons than men" (321). Jacques' and Taylor's findings are not surprising given the innate association of the personal with the feminine in their epistemological approach. Furthermore, their findings are in keeping with Irigaray's analysis of how the sexes use language differently—women adopting more relational terms and men locating themselves within the wider world.

However, it is in *how* these notions of the personal and the religious/nationalistic inflect the final interpretation of suicide bombings that we see how the problem represented by the woman bomber's agency is negotiated. Importing terminology from other studies of suicide terrorism, Jacques and Taylor conclude that religious and nationalistic motives lead to "altruistic" actions, while the suicide bomber motivated by personal reasons is "fatalistic" (321). In other words, while the male suicide bomber is read as making a political or ideological stand for the group to which he is attached, the female suicide bomber is read as engaging in suicide bombing because her personal life has made her suicidal, as is the case

with non-terrorist suicide. This contrast in representation becomes particularly interesting in light of Rajan's analysis that men do frequently connect their involvement in suicide terrorism to "personal" motivations. Thus, Rajan's study challenges attempts to make a distinction between the "personal" and the ideological or political by making clear that the political, ideological, and cultural contexts in which all those who turn to suicide terrorism live necessarily impacts on their personal lives (Rajan, see in particular chapter 1). Therefore, when the Western epistemology of terrorism describes the woman terrorist as motivated by the "personal," it does so specifically in order to disavow the possibility of feminine agency. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the figure of the woman suicide bomber who "slips ideas of the bomb with that of the body, rendering it a weapon of war" (Rajan 16). At the moment in which a woman becomes pure bodily action, terrorism discourses undermine her agency by describing it as a pathological self-destruction, not as an attempt to intervene in the wider narratives that shape her social sphere. Even the most extreme manifestation of women's violence is not seen as an attack, effectively rendering the "woman terrorist" an impossible figure.

Woman, as the exceptional subject and as the non-masculine in a phallic economy, will always be read through her body in Western representations. Her actions are always related to her gender, and this connection to her body means that her motivations will inevitably be understood as "personal." The failure to recognise that the sexes locate themselves within linguistic representations differently means that women's own testimonies lead them to be read as deviating from a masculine norm; consequently, their actions are automatically imbued with pathological overtones. Psychological factors are discussed throughout terrorism studies that take men as the "normal" terrorist, but are rarely considered in isolation, as the mind-set of the terrorist is placed in the wider context of political, economic, social, and educational influences. Poverty, disenfranchisement, and a sense that

one's identity and status have been maligned are seen as factors leading the normal, gender-neutral terrorist to lash out against this assault on their sense of self by turning to the "compelling collective identities" offered by terrorist organisations (Jacques and Taylor 306). Yet although it is an attack on one's identity and status that leads one to turn to terrorist organisations, somehow these motivations are never read as "personal." If, as Irigaray suggests, men more readily relate themselves to the abstract concepts that permeate a phallic economy, is it any surprise that their testimonies locate their actions in a wider cultural context in a way that bestows greater value and agency their motivations? An epistemology that takes the masculine as its yardstick does not hear women in their own terms but instead understands their accounts in relation to another's discourse. As such, women's language is interpreted as being "personal" and so is disconnected from the broader contextual factors affecting their lives. The result of this personalisation is damaging: woman's violence is inherently associated with her psychological make-up, and, hence, her resort to violence carries with it pathological overtones.

The cultural desire to reduce women to their bodily presence and assess their value through their bodies within Western systems of representation reinforces this sense of pathology. Understanding women through their bodies means they are persistently located within the immediate contexts they inhabit. Unlike the gender-neutral terrorist—the masculine terrorist whose gender goes unremarked until women enter terrorism discourses—the factors that motivate a woman to resort to terrorism must arise from her experiences within the domestic sphere. The death of a loved one, a sexual assault, family dishonour, or the persuasive words of a militant man she loves obsessively are all often cited by studies as fully explaining her turn to violence. Despite Jacques and Taylor's recognition that men and women living under the same conditions will suffer loss and become aggressive in a similar fashion, it is only woman's violence that is persistently located in the domestic,

rather than in the nationalistic or global, context. There is rarely, if ever, any recognition that the death of child is connected to the suffering of a community at large, or that a woman's own sense of disenfranchisement from national or international economic, social, or political spheres could be a potential motive. Her violence comes from the domestic, familial sphere, or by coerced indoctrination from the men around her into "big ideas" she would not otherwise understand or even be conscious of.

In essence, the Western epistemology of terrorism locates the possibility of female violence firmly in a woman's immediate surroundings, never in the abstract. Similarly, her violence is always rooted in pain caused by a traumatic experience in her immediate sphere, and thus becomes a consequence of her vulnerability to her own emotional states. She is never quite the rational master of her own work and thus is deprived of any agency. Most troubling of all, as so few women living in the same conditions resort to violence, the woman terrorist or suicide bomber is represented as an even greater aberration because she alone, unlike other women in comparable circumstances, is unable to tolerate the conditions she is living under. The epistemology of terrorism suggests she alone deviates from an infinitely tolerant feminine norm in her turn to violence.

It is arguably this perception of transgression that circulates beneath the fascination with women and terrorism in Western political, media and academic discourses. It is accepted that a specific set of circumstances and strains will lead a man to deploy his agency violently—and that this action is logical and consciously undertaken. Yet when women choose to do the same under the same conjunction of motivating factors, her engagement is read as both exceptional and deviant: for a woman to eschew the natural tolerance and passivity of femininity, something out of the ordinary must have happened to her personally. This universal rendering of the feminine manifests itself in the peculiar way in which cultural specificity is overwritten when discussing women's motivations. Despite the fact that women

are always located within their domestic surroundings, these surroundings become almost a-cultural in relation to women's violence. Whilst men's actions are contextualised by discourses around nationalism, religion, global politics, etc., the application of the epistemology of the personal means that women's contexts are disconnected from these wider discourses. Thus, women are rarely cultural agents, located in specific socio-cultural contexts, but are instead representatives of patriarchal notions of a universal feminine.

Indeed, Jacques and Taylor state explicitly that their attempt to explain female terrorism necessitates ignoring cultural specificity, as they exclude consideration of work that "suggests that suicide terrorists from differing groups may hold dissimilar motivations" in order to provide "an initial investigation of the pervasive differences between females and males"(311). Thus, their study follows the conventional wisdom of most terrorism discourses. In removing the context in which women have resorted to violence—such an epistemological approach—perpetuates the West's stereotype that women are apolitical wives and mothers who should remain entirely within the domestic sphere. In other words, women are denied any capacity to act within the abstract realms of the ideological, religious, political, and cultural. In the epistemology of terrorism, women across the globe are read as being outside of the systems in conflict. The female terrorist is the other of the terrorist Other, and as such, she can have no agency of her own, not even the deviant agency accorded to the gender-neutral figure of the terrorist.

### **Implications**

The disavowal of sexuate difference in Western culture leads to an overwriting of women's cultural specificity in its epistemological frameworks. This, in effect, denies women any agency, even when women have taken up arms in conflict. While I have necessarily focused on the representations of women's violence in research arising from

Western sources, Rajan demonstrates that similar processes take place on all sides of a conflict:

Western nations tend to depict women bombers through common stereotypes of Third World women who are assumed to be victimized by Third World men and backward Third World cultures [ . . . ]. In contrast, rebel nationalists produce images of women bombers to resonate with iconic cultural registers of femininity central to various anti-colonial nationalist movements in the colonial era, of women who sacrificed for and were loyal only to their cultures (3).

Viewed as victims or idealised by propaganda, women's voices are silenced by the images of them produced by competing forces. Rajan's observations echo what Spivak describes as the "dialectically interlocking sentences" around *sati* in the British India, where colonizing and colonized men spoke for native women: "White men are saving brown women from brown men," and "The women wanted to die" ("Subaltern" 93). Once again, women find themselves placed in a subaltern position, denied of any stake in the discourses surrounding them by patriarchal discourses.

I cannot speak for the women who have become suicide bombers or turned to terrorist violence. However, I can attempt to draw attention to the consequences this sustained disavowal of women's violent agency can have on the West's understanding of the possibility of women having any form of legitimate agency. Returning again to Spivak's observation about the symbiotic nature of response, we have to ask what impact these constructions have on the culture that produces them? If the West's response to women's terrorism is to represent them as lacking agency, even as they become pure physical effect, what kind of norms does this reinstall in the West?

These norms begin to manifest themselves as terrorism discourses co-opt seemingly feminist rhetoric. Increasingly, the roles assigned to women by various terrorist groups have become a means of vilifying the group. Organisations that consider women as "equals" within the movement are criticised, Ness observes, for "not [being] entirely able to divest themselves of the widely held beliefs about gender embedded in the culture surrounding



them” (“In the Name” 355), whilst groups that exclude women because, as Michael Burleigh writes, they “belong in the crib and kitchen” (393) are scorned for their sexism. These accusations have been lobbed at Marxist, anarchist, nationalist, and other politically-motivated terrorist groups over the decades, but most recently, accusations of sexism and the willingness to abuse women have been used in Western terrorism discourses to discredit conservative Islamic groups who bring women into their ranks (Cook). Just as the Bush administration cloaked its invasion of Afghanistan in the rhetoric of women’s rights, so terrorism studies use a reductive concept of feminism to pillory terrorist organizations for failing to provide “equal opportunities.” In doing so, these studies aim to discredit the group by holding them to higher standards of gender equality than are present in the societies around them, in a manner that positions the West as the progressive standard bearer of such equality. In essence, within terrorism discourses, feminism-as-equal-rights no longer concerns women’s agency, but becomes a means of identifying enlightened masculinity and deviant masculinity, with the terrorist exposed as the perpetual misogynist.

When conflated with this appropriation and reduction of feminism, the representation of the personally motivated woman terrorist collapses the possibility of women’s agency in a system that only recognises the purely political or ideological as a legitimate form of social intervention or motivation. Discrediting a terrorist group because of its gender politics undermines women’s agency once again. The men in such readings become misogynist, hypocritical, or exploitative. Women—always read as acting in relation to their gender whether their goals are explicitly feminist or not—can only be seen as the poor dupes of a masculine machine. Their attempts to act, to participate in something beyond the domestic sphere, leave them vulnerable to exploitation. Or if they are read as following an equal rights agenda, feminist thinking has either led them into danger or to become dangerous, as their demand for equality becomes a demand for violent action. In either case, such rhetoric

suggests that feminist ideals and fantasies of equality lead vulnerable women into the hands of men who would exploit them, or encourages women with “unnatural” predispositions to violent behaviour to actually harm others.

The possibility that feminisms could provide ideological, political, and revolutionary motivations is rarely recognised in terrorism studies, even as research such as Gonzalez-Perez’s suggests women are more likely to be involved in militant action that will bring about a direct change in their status as citizens (7). Thus, the epistemology of terrorism not only reduces feminism to a personal, rather than a political, agenda, but it inflects feminism with pathological overtones to represent it as an ethos that leaves women vulnerable or dangerously aggressive.

It is in this articulation of feminism that we see that the Western epistemological approach to terrorism has consequences for both the women under scrutiny and the women who belong to the cultures producing the framework. As Brigitte Nacos eloquently illustrates, women’s political agency in the West already suffers from being translated in terms that parallel that of women terrorists (Nacos). For feminist approaches to become associated with the pathological and the purely personal would see the shutting down of the very discourses that women use to locate and articulate what little agency they can. Given the growing significance terrorism discourses have in shaping counter-terrorist strategy on the national and international stage there is a very real risk that such reductive misreadings of feminisms will be, albeit unconsciously, installed at the highest legislative levels. The disavowal of women’s violent agency within terrorism discourses potentially impacts on all aspects of all women’s agency.

Whilst we have long realised that legal and cultural frameworks in even the most “liberated” countries take the masculine as the normative human subject, to date such frameworks remain idiosyncratic, regional, and contextual. However, it is within emerging

global discourses, like those around terrorism which seemingly have nothing to do with gender and sexuate identities, that understandings of normative identities are being exported, absorbed, and encoded at a global level. This quiet installation of a global norm has the potential to be incredibly tenacious, as it remains largely beneath the level of explicit articulation and produces a hegemonic epistemological and ontological reading of women and femininity that is harder to counter than the explicit anomalies thrown up by regional or culturally-specific genderings. In the face of such a global hegemony, it becomes imperative that we critique the mechanisms that figure our understandings of the world. By drawing on the work of Spivak and Irigaray, I hope to have demonstrated that the two together offer us the means to do this. It is only when the West recognises the possibility of “at least two” subjects by cultivating sexuate difference that we can truly interrupt our constructions in order to hear the other. Without such a recognition, we continue to study spectres of our own making.

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